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Current Communications

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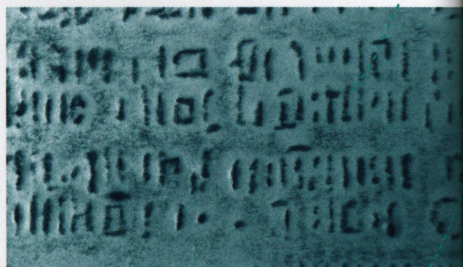
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CURRENT COMMUNICATIONS

Jake Groth





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It is often said that as an architecture student you will learn more from your fellow students than from your professors. During my first year in the professional program I found this statement to hold true. Coming from the freshman core program, I had my own ideas of what I thought architecture at Iowa State was. Reality proved to be quite the opposite. Most of my first semester consisted of a scramble to understand what I was supposed to be doing. Since I was at a loss with my own misconceptions, I turned to those around me in the 2nd year. Located within the new King Pavilion, intercommunication between studios occurs regularly. During breaks late at night I find myself walking around the studio to see what everyone is working on. Those once aimless walks have become a habitual part of my design process.

On these walks I see different points of view and creative uses of materials. All of the different techniques I saw inspired my own ideas. A student used plaster to create a volumetric model of Chicago and immediately I thought of the positive and negative qualities moldable materials have. The same student created a solid-void map, not unlike Giambattista Nolli's, by pressing on the reverse side of the paper to make a form of city Braille. Immediately I thought of how Braille, on a larger scale, could translate into a building façade (my apologies to the blind). Another classmate used sugar cubes as an abstraction of modular forms, but when he sanded the cubes the sugar crystals themselves created an interesting

organic texture. None of these ideas should be looked at with awe and reverence but rather the important thing is that these ideas originated from those around me. We should use our peers as a method to inspire

and motivate each other. Our designs can build upon their ideas and processes. I am not suggesting we copy the work of our fellow students; rather, we should learn from their mistakes and expand upon what they started.

SOON AFTER DISCOVERING HOW MUCH I COULD LEARN FROM MY CLASSMATES, I SET OUT TO TAKE A LOOK AT THE ENTIRE ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM AT IOWA STATE.

I walked up the spiral staircase and journeyed over to the armory to see the works in progress. I asked questions, learned about new projects, and got excited about the program in general. I wanted to learn more about the program so I turned to the architecture website, where finding information proved to be more of a task than I expected. Online I found limited samples of student work. In the various publications like the architecture brochure or past issues of CORE, I found even less information. The best information I found was on the 2nd floor in student services where I found a few past graduates' portfolios that depicted their work. After flipping through these individual student portfolios I was handed the annual portfolio of the UW-Milwaukee School of Architecture and Urban Planning. Within the massive book of 130 pages I saw projects

from every studio and every year. I closed the book with a full understanding of how the architecture program at UW-Milwaukee operates. The same is true for their website, which is well designed so finding a project description requires only a few simple clicks. This left me wondering, why doesn't Iowa State have a portfolio or a website up to this standard?

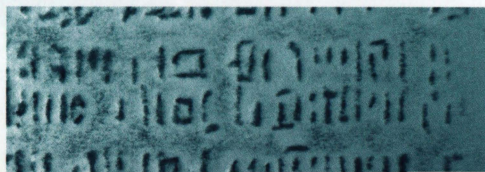
The most likely answer is that no one has the time or money. On top of that some organization needs to step up and become the 'architects' of such a publication. Maybe the members of *Datum* are these people. We discussed this regularly at meetings, and ultimately decided that the publication would feature essays and samples of exceptional student work. Whichever the case, the major factor in the lack of communication in and around our program is the absence of an architecture compendium. As a result, communication within our department is at a standstill. It feels like there is no enthusiasm for the work we are doing. Across the board most faculty members have no idea what other studios or teachers are working on. Sure, some small talk may occur in the elevator, but the only formal cue to what is going on between studios happens through events on display in Gallery 183, program days, and more recently at the lecture series.

The most peculiar way we learned about other studios this year was through "What's in the box?," an overhyped event that could only hold disappointment for the masses. In spite of this, when the box was finally opened the entire college was there to watch. Although nothing was physically inside, the box did contain something. Inside was an idea that brought students in the college together, and got them talking about their latest projects. The box started simple, eventually growing into a topic of daily conversation, an unexpected result. This is what our program has the potential to achieve, communicating to others so they may talk about Iowa State with excitement and appreciation. People need to know what is going on underneath this glass roof, but this level of communication comes with challenges.

Unlike the ease of communication described in the first few paragraphs, communicating our ideals at the program level proves to be full of controversy and differing opinions. What exactly are we, as a program, trying to accomplish? Where are we headed? How do we ultimately want our program viewed as and understood to be? I asked professors their opinions on the matter, and received mixed responses. In the end, they came to the conclusion that Iowa State produces well-rounded students through studios and required courses, yet offers opportunities to students to become more specialized in areas such as digital media, architectural theory, environmental studies, etc. For people on the outside looking in it is hard to understand what the program is officially about at this specific moment in time. The faculty changes and so do the requirements, but most of the change occurs within classroom to keep the environment active and current. It is for this reason that we must keep people informed. As architecture itself changes, so should we. Keeping our distributed media up to date needs to become a priority.

Currently, communication to other entities outside the college is in shambles, and desperately needs updating. The ISU architecture informational pamphlet tells prospective students about projects that have been discontinued. In Arch 202, for example, we no longer make motion machines as described, but instead we can be found working on a project focused on representation at different scales. The new project was implemented because the motion machine only taught a small amount

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in the allotted timeframe in comparison to the current scale project. After reading the pamphlet, incoming students will turn to the architecture website. Its arrangement of tabs and menus make it extremely hard to find useable information or samples of student work. The only thing current is a photo of Gregory Palermo's bowtie. Architecture may be nearly impossible to describe via a pamphlet or website, but the fact remains that both of these publications are what we have handed out to represent our image. Is this what we want to say? Fortunately the new website is under construction and hopefully will be implemented soon. The reason for the slow update was in the attempt to find a professor, already overloaded with classes, to create the website in their precious free time.

Critics may say that updating and having publications such as these is not important to those in the program, or even important at all. I somewhat agree, but information communicated currently may be the key to unlocking our potential. This is why I stress the importance of exchanging thoughts, opinions, or ideas in the workplace and in the studio environment. Earlier I described how intercommunication between studios led to a better understanding of projects and later went on to form new ideas and new inspirations. The same is true for our future employers. The goal is that someday employers can pick up a publication about the architecture department and clearly understand what we are trying to accomplish. From there, an appreciation toward the students of Iowa State will be formed. All of this will lead to a higher overall reputation for the program and better job placements for graduates. If this is the case then why do we — as students — not take the initiative to capitalize on this phenomenon? Is it because we have so much work on our plates, or is it because we feel intimidated to cross the inter-class barrier? I think it is that over time we become so locked into our own environment and routine that we forget to consider the influence of external sources. The 2nd and 3rd years are lucky and are somewhat encouraged to break routine because of the close

proximity of studios within the King Pavilion and Armory. As a result, collaboration between studios occurs easily. Why limit this to the 75 people of your own class, rather than talking to the 325 other architecture students that are in studio every MWF from 1:10 to 5:20?

In order to realize the outcomes stated above; we, as students of Iowa State, need to take the initiative to share and communicate the work within our program to each other. It is an internal process that ultimately shapes the outsider's perception of us. It can start as easily as taking a break from studio and wandering to another studio to talk to a friend.

OR, IT CAN BE MORE RADICAL, LIKE TALKING TO THE FACULTY OR BY JOINING STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS.

It can happen when you bump into someone in the print lab or in the atrium.

Another idea that the college could implement could be to designate one hour each week to walking between studios to foster skills in communication. If we can learn to communicate our ideas with ease, then students and everyone else (faculty, the College of Design, the architecture community, and employers) will be on the same page. In my current state within the program, I am only at the beginning of grasping what we are about. I can only hope that in my next three years I will fully understand.

In the past few years our program has begun to lose its reputation. People do not know of the wonderful things we are creating here. If Iowa State wants to build a better program than it already has, they must share our current successes with the larger architecture community. We will gain morale, and a sense of community pride through our publications. If we focus internally and build upon ourselves it will inevitably lead to better communication with the outside. They are ready to listen; we just need to start talking. ▲